

## JOURNALISM AND PUBLIC OPINION

BY ROLLO OGDEN

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Any open-minded inquirer into the relations between the press and public opinion in this country will be met at the threshold by a series of paradoxes. The evidence offered him is sharply conflicting, even radically contradictory. Newspapers are all-powerful. They are also completely impotent. The press is at once dreaded and despised, dismissed as negligible at the same time that it is fawned upon. Men in public life will at one moment make every effort to get, in the French phrase, a "bonne presse," for themselves and their measures but at the next will rail at newspaper opposition as a thing at which they may snap their fingers. Their opinion of the futility of the press, it may be noted, is usually intensified, if not originally provoked, by their ceasing to stand high in its good graces.

Newspaper men, I pause here to remark, are willing to hear testimony showing the decline of their influence. But they may be excused for objecting when the only witnesses summoned are politicians with a grievance. Some editors have memories. Those who have not have records. And by either it would be easy to prove that some of the most vehement decriers of the newspaper press have been converted to their present view with suspicious suddenness. There is, for example, that public man who for many years was the most skilful user of the press that has ever been seen. It was not simply that he had an eye for effect keener than that of any advertiser in the world; but that he flattered and cultivated pressmen with the most unblushing assiduity. His attentions he showered upon all alike. Even the most indecent journalist of the age, who was for years, like Donne's Anchorite,

Bedded and bathed in all his ordures,

this man had no scruple in receiving on personal and confidential terms. Latterly he has begun to cry out upon dishonest and decadent newspapers. Well and good. Let him lay on. But why did he wait to go against the press until the press went against him? The same question

might be put to that city executive who now fills the air with complaints of a degenerate press, though no man more earnestly than he sought the support, and sung the praises, of the very newspapers he to-day denounces. The men of the press, I say, may well ask for witnesses with the taint of inconsistency not so gross and palpable upon them. Those in and out of journalism who have long sought to make head against its worst types, may be forgiven if they resent this late born zeal of recent converts.

Yet the unchallenged facts arrest attention. At times, it is true, newspapers appear to have a power both vast and dangerous. At others, they seem to have none at all. Now able to do anything, they presently are capable of nothing. There are classic instances. In the city of Toledo all the newspapers of all parties were hostile to a certain candidate for the mayoralty. They had fought him before, but he had beaten them. In the campaign referred to they decided upon the policy of ignoring him. They did not mention his name. They did not report his meetings or his speeches. They even refused to print political advertisements offered by him. But he was easily elected over this form of united opposition by suppression. There are other cases not unlike this. It has frequently happened in New York City that the press has been almost a unit against Tammany; yet Tammany has apparently shown that it could afford to despise the newspapers.

What have newspaper men to say to all this? First of all, they are not disposed to blink the facts. They know that it would do no good if they did. The influence of the press, whether good or bad, whether increasing or declining, is a theme of general discussion. Those in the business cannot be blind to this. They are aware of what is said. If outsiders are inclined to believe that the press has become "fortune's champion," merely "strong upon the stronger side," but powerless either to create or to direct public sentiment—much less to stem it—be sure that those on the inside do not shut these things from their thoughts. They can assume no airs of mystery. Their work is done in the general eye. It is fair game for the critics. Certainly the great clamorers for publicity cannot escape publicity. Nor do they seek to. As little as men in other callings are they fond of "talking shop" in public, but on fit occasion, like the present, they are ready to submit the whole question to impartial debate. And in their private or professional gatherings, let me add, they are as far as possible from swelling up in each other's presence with a pretence of inflated importance. If any of them were to be caught falling back upon comfortable plati-

tudes about newspapers, or indulging in any of the solemn nonsense of Mr. Pott of the *Eatanswill Gazette* about the "enormous power of the press," he would be taken to task by some colleague, as that great man was by Mrs. Pott, and adjured to leave off making himself ridiculous.

In most discussions of the whole question, the test of the present-day rôle of the press in our public life is made the political test. The thing asserted or denied, that is to say, is the power of newspapers to make or break candidates for office, to carry elections. This is the region where the facts are most confused and the conclusions most dubious. There are no means of absolutely correct analysis. A given anti-Tammany campaign may seem to prove, by the rough logic of votes, that the press has no influence with the electorate. But who can say that, but for the persistent attitude of the newspapers, the Tammany victory at the polls might not have been much more sweeping? The press may have influenced many votes, only not enough. There is no way of telling accurately. The inquiry, however, is always pertinent at a time when the political effect of the press appears to be near the vanishing point. Moderate or negative achievement is not the same thing as impotence. But, whatever the just inference about all this, it is a mistaken narrowing of the subject to restrict it to the political sphere. By politics alone neither man nor the daily press shall live. Campaigns are, after all, infrequent. Elections come but once a year—unless, indeed, one lives in Oregon or California, where they have come to be like daily bread. Even where the political animal is most highly developed, he has a wide range of intellectual and social interests having little or nothing to do with primaries or ballots or elections. Mr. Balfour, himself a politician, has said that nothing attempted or achieved by politicians or by political parties during the past hundred years is worthy to be named in significance for the human race alongside the mighty revolution quietly accomplished by modern science. There are, in fact, endless manifestations of the spirit of man and social movements of infinite complexity and importance, with which politics has nothing to do directly. Yet they enter more and more into the work of the press. It may be potent here even if it be conceded to have fallen away from its high estate in the matter of political influence, pure and simple.

I have just used a phrase implying that newspapers have lost power which they once had. But that is by no means certain. Great changes in the press there have undoubtedly been; its methods are not what they were; its influence, whatever it be, is exerted by means and modes

of expression once undreamed of. But to affirm that the press in this country had a Golden Age from which there has since been a sad decline is, in my opinion, unwarranted. It is an assertion that will not bear the weight of a good history. People can always find decadence when they look for it. The Golden Age is invariably one generation back. And if we turn to one of the earliest intelligent discussions of the American press, and of its relations to public opinion, we shall find that seventy and eighty years ago the present complaints about the decline of newspapers were anticipated. I refer to De Tocqueville. His two chapters, with scattered incidental discussions, devoted to the place of journalism in the United States, have a queerly modern sound. He, too, discovered in that far-off happy time—happy because it is far off—that “the most intelligent Americans” were much concerned about “the little influence of the press.” Doubtless they would have sadly shaken their heads and told the French visitor that they could remember when American journalism was much more dignified—the days of Freneau, for example!

De Tocqueville, however, made some philosophic observations of his own respecting our press, which are as sound now, in substance, as when he wrote them. Indeed, one in want of a guide to the understanding of the power and the limitations of our newspapers today, could not do better than take him. He declared, for example, that “the press cannot create human passions, however skilfully it may kindle them when they exist.” There is a world of meaning in this. It is as true in 1912 as it was in 1831. And it applies not alone to the attempts of the press to play a great part in politics and to bring about changes in government, but as well to the whole range of intellectual interests and social concerns and the development of the humane spirit of our age, about which the press is more and more busying itself. Newspapers cannot create human passions. No, but the press can powerfully further them. Take the passion for human betterment. I have been told of a piece of advice which President Eliot is said to have given to a youth just graduating from college. He was an ardent young fellow, of good family and ample means, but filled with that sense of “social compunction” which Mrs. Ward has said to be the characteristic note of our day. He was anxious, that is, to do something for the improvement of social conditions; specifically, to help to correct certain social injustices, as he considered them, which had been impressed upon him in his own city. How to go about the work on which he had his heart? Mr. Eliot advised him to connect himself as a reporter with

one of the local newspapers. In that capacity, he would be able, in a vivid and concrete way, to get before his public an account of the wrongs to be righted with suggestions of the way to right them. Without vouching for the truth of the story, I think that the moral of it is entirely sound, in so far as it points to the fact that social reformers find in the press today a powerful instrument ready to their hand. Through it they may, first, disseminate the facts, often in a moving fashion; then bring about a common sentiment respecting some surviving form of human oppression, some persistent industrial or social wrong; and finally transmute that feeling into systematic agitation and an organized movement for reform by law.

All this, to go back to De Tocqueville, was clearly perceived by him. What I have been saying is but an illustration of his remark: "When many organs of the press adopt the same line of conduct, their influence, in the long run, becomes irresistible; and public opinion, powerfully assailed from the same side, eventually yields to the attack." That was true in the middle of the nineteenth century and it is true to-day. The press may not greatly initiate but it wonderfully reverberates. In its franker moments it has humbly to confess itself, with Lowell, "child of an age that lectures, not creates;" but given the origination of an idea or an agitation, it can contribute mightily to its acceptance by the reading public. Here comes in its power of iteration—"damnable," if you please, in many instances, but none the less effective. The organization of news in this country yields a result nowhere else known. By means of the Associated Press, and other news-gathering agencies, it often comes about that all our millions of population are reading the same thing on the same day. This implies both an audience and a unified power of impressing it without a parallel in other lands. And no one denies that the opportunity is availed of. For good or bad, the newspaper-reading habit of Americans, combined with this ability to present virtually identical matter in every section of the republic, is a vital element in the formation of public opinion. Instance after instance could be given of the continual dropping which wears away the stone. It is, no doubt, true that newspapers "cannot form those great currents of opinion which sweep away the strongest dikes," but they do offer themselves as ready channels for the flowing of such currents, once they get started in the thought and feeling of the people.

This may be a humbler function than is customarily attributed to the press, or claimed by it, but few will dispute that it is a useful one,

or may be made so. The methods or devices employed to exert even this kind of influence are much in controversy, both in and out of the profession—if profession it may be called. It is frequently said that newspaper editorials are no longer of any account. An editorial writer could hardly be expected to maintain the contrary. The chief emphasis is laid upon the news columns, more or less colored by the policy or the bias of the particular paper, upon the cartoons, above all upon the headlines. About the last, especially, there is much complaint. Not all of it is without justification. The headline often covereth a multitude of sins. Politicians and others attacked by the newspapers are heard bitterly to say that if they could write the headlines they would not care what appeared in the rest of the paper. That an abuse lies in this, sometimes grievous abuse, no honest newspaper man would deny.

But it should not escape notice that those who rail at the press for seeking to mislead the public by capital letters and staring colored type are indicting, not only the press, but the general intelligence. If readers suffer themselves to be fooled by captions, without waiting to see whether they are borne out by the contents, what is this but one proof more that the faculty of sustained attention is disappearing? If we nowadays peruse serious books only by titles and chapter headings, and take our art merely by glances at facile reproductions, what wonder if we read newspapers on the run, and let the eye dwell upon little that is not at the top of the page?

Here is suggested the important consideration that there is something reciprocal in the relations of the press to the public. Newspapers, like party leaders, get from their constituents, as well as give to them. In either case it is a nice question whether they do not get more than they give. The press cannot be studied or fairly judged apart from its environment. It is, with all our institutions, caught in the complex of our actual state of civilization. And the whole question of bringing about reforms in newspaper methods—Heavens know that they are needed—must be discussed from both sides. Editors have their responsibility, and in some cases the responsibility for what they do is fearful; but the public is also responsible. The community always holds the power of life or death over newspapers. No form of property is more precarious. The most offensive and hurtful types of newspaper could not live a year if the public issued a really determined decree that they should die. I cannot here discuss the duty of newspaper proprietors and editors, in regard to the admitted evils of the press in our

day. But the chief duty of the public is to discriminate among newspapers. Towards the vulgar and vicious it should manifest not only disgust but an active and unflagging hostility. The location of the Garden of Eden is still in dispute; but if it ever is determined and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil discovered, a cutting from it should be taken and planted near every news-stand in America.

## THE PRESS AND PUBLIC OPINION

### ABSTRACT

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A man reading a political editorial is usually in the minds of men who set out to discuss the relation between "The Press and Public Opinion." "Does it convince him," they ask. The issue is broader, as broad as the consciousness of society. Without a common consciousness in regard to the fact and event of the day, shared by individuals, but known together and at once, public opinion, in the modern sense, could not exist. The opinion and action of modern society in all its various forms and channels rests on the possession by the individuals who make up society of a common body of knowledge and fact supplied day by day in the newspaper. If the individuals who make up the social organism did not have this common daily knowledge of a common body of fact which each knows is in common, they could not feel, think or act together any more than the individual can have conscious feeling, thought and action without the light of consciousness to enable him to act. This common consciousness of society the newspaper creates. The street and marketplace do something, the public meeting does more, the book, weekly and monthly, go a step farther to bring people to think the same things about the republic, and on all the issues of society, but the daily newspaper does more than all the rest put together. The reason why the news in a newspaper counts is not because news is recorded there. All news, social, political, criminal, has other records. Newspaper news is news and not daily annals, because it is read by great masses. Every reader knows that all other readers are in the same light of facts, chronicled with more or less accuracy it may be, but still read by all and known by all. In the light of this common consciousness, common opinion develops and the relation of the opinion-making part of a newspaper, the editorial, to the making of opinion rests on the fact that it enters on the field of common public consciousness at the very moment that event and issue are calling for opinions, decision and action. The editorial is perpetually weighed and estimated as if it were something said by one man to